



VERTIGO'S MOST DEVIOUS

JOHN CONSTANTINE, JESSE CUSTER, AND JACK
HORNER

A Companion Booklet To The Vertigo Encyclopedia

By
Shelly Bond

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VERTIGO COMICS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION..... 3

JOHN CONSTANTINE..... 6

JESSE CUSTER..... 10

JACK HORNER..... 13

CLOSING 16

ABOUT THE AUTHOR..... 17

INTRODUCTION

For a decade that I have worked for DC and Vertigo Comics, I have seen (and have given input to) many creative ideas over the years. Some didn't see the light of day while others would become some of the company's most iconic staples and masterpieces. So when I heard that we were finally creating an encyclopedia strictly for the titles and characters of Vertigo Comics, I just couldn't help but write this little booklet. I may be the editor of Vertigo, but I also considered myself its number one fan. And over the years I have read series and titles from the publication that I believe truly encapsulate what Vertigo Comics is all about.

Vertigo Comics first came into existence as the comic book industry began shifting into the more realistic, so-called Bronze Age of Comics. It was an exciting era; gone were the powers of the Comics Code Authority and new writers and artists from outside of the U.S. were coming in bringing new ideas. At that time, DC Comics was torn whether they should continue focusing on traditional, simple, morally upright superhero adventure comics, or focus more on darker and more complex, morally and politically empowered stories that were becoming popular. Each style has its strengths and weaknesses, and DC decided they wouldn't be able to let go of their traditional superhero storytelling in favor of artistic and experimental writing.

Hence why Vertigo Comics was born — a home for those who crave yarns that were political, philosophical, or downright cynical, which would either feel out of place from mainstream DC titles, or would prove too controversial to be published by DC Comics. Of course, this didn't mean that mainstream DC titles are simple and more geared toward kids and casual readers. Even though Vertigo markets its stories for "mature audiences", DC titles have been using mature themes like sex and politics for a very long time (thanks to the likes of Alan Moore and Dennis O'Neal). However, only in Vertigo could writers and artists have more freedom to explore themes that just wouldn't fly for the average American, like socialism, anti-religion, anarchy, and even magic and occultic practices. Mature audience simply means more liberated, less sensitive, readers, and I'm pretty sure if it's not for Vertigo Comics there will be protests from parents who might discover their children reading a *Preacher* title that has the DC logo in it (for reference, this is a story where God is depicted as a jerk who gets gunned down by a vengeful cowboy).

That's why I fell in love with Vertigo more than DC. I still am a DC fangirl ever since I was a kid but it is in Vertigo where I enjoyed art the most. In Vertigo, there are nearly no rules. It is in Vertigo where you can make villains into heroes, the unlikeable into the valiant, and characters that spit in the face of traditional storytelling. But if you've already read this far into my essay, you are probably wondering what makes Vertigo Comics so special for me to like it. What makes a character qualify as genuinely Vertigo born?

Lewis Lovhaug (aka Linkara) once summarized the difference between DC superheroes and Marvel superheroes. For him, DC heroes are people you aspire to, while Marvel heroes are people you relate to. What makes DC characters entertaining are their accomplishments against titanic odds through skills and talent (Batman outsmarting Darkseid), while what makes Marvel characters special are the problems they face that are common to us real folks (Spider-Man dealing with financial problems while trying to save the day). However, this doesn't mean that all DC and Marvel characters should be generalized so easily like this, since there are definitely some people who also relate to DC heroes. This is simply an observation of the majority of the style of character building between the two companies, which I myself also agree.

Vertigo characters, on the other hand, are written differently. Some can be aspiring and some are relatable, but the core characteristic of Vertigo heroes is that they are people you rebel with. They are outcasts through choice, jerks with a heart of gold, and rogues who flip the bird against the conventional and the common. Almost every Vertigo character is a loner, and almost all of them smirk like there's no tomorrow. There ain't nothing they're afraid of, even if they have to face the devil or God himself. One can also say that Vertigo characters are a product of their time. Many of them were born during the 90s and early 2000s; a time of attitude and rebellion — the era of WWE and Sonic the Hedgehog. Such traits aren't just present in Vertigo characters; they're also present in Vertigo-style storytelling. There's almost no issue that is controversial, no topic that is safe. And I've read stories that dramatically tackle, or even make fun of, issues ranging from radicalism, and drugs, to even incest. Some topics, like school shootings, were deemed too controversial or offensive, but we still ended up publishing stories about them anyway. Because we're just that rebellious.

That being said, Vertigo stories are not for everybody, and their characters can sometimes be difficult to like. I've received opinions and criticisms from people on how they dislike, and are even horrified, of the main characters in our stories. Indeed, characters like Sebastian O and Spider Jerusalem are not good role models,

and I would even laugh at you if you decide to be like them. Yet, not all stories are bright and cheerful; there is entertainment for everyone, and I know that the various support we've been receiving over the years is a testament that what we've been doing is right. Vertigo Comics is a home for rogues and rebels. It's not a clean home, nor a peaceful one, but it is a home.

JOHN CONSTANTINE

From: *Swamp Thing* and *Hellblazer* by various writers



Almost every major comic book publisher has some mascot; an iconic character that makes people think of the publication whenever they hear their name. DC Comics has Superman, Marvel Comics has Spider-Man, Image Comics has Spawn, Dark Horse Comics has Hellboy, and Valiant Comics has X-O Manowar. I used to think Morpheus is the one for Vertigo Comics, but the one character that deserves that recognition — the one people recognize as coming from Vertigo, the man that exemplifies the qualities of a Vertigo character, and the protagonist of Vertigo's longest comic book series — is John Constantine, *Hellblazer*.

For those who don't know him, John Constantine is the resident supernatural investigator and master of the occult stationed in London, England of the DC and the Vertigo Universe. He is like a Philip Marlowe of horror — the one who tackles cases and mysteries involving vampires, demons, elementals, sorcerers, and gods. He is both a consulting detective, one who extends his knowledge and skills to

those who need him; and an enigmatic helper and adventurer who appears in the right place and the right time to offer assistance even if no one calls for it.

The Hellblazer has been with DC and Vertigo for more than two decades, and I personally have seen his growth and development with every writer over the years. I remember not being impressed with the character when I first saw him. For me, he was not so different appearance-wise from all the other long coat-wearing urban wizards and occult detectives in fiction, like Hannibal King from Marvel Comics. However, through time and reading, I later learned to see how special the character is.

He's a wizard like Gandalf, but he wears a grungy trench coat and a tie rather than a hat and a staff. He's a detective like Sherlock Holmes but he's a pauper than a gentleman, a hustler more than an intellectual. He's also far too different from other magical investigators like Zatara Zatanna and Dr. Strange, for he wears no pipe hat or colorful robe, doesn't live inside a gothic mansion, nor is his magic even that flashy and spectacular. Alan Moore, Steve Bissette, Rick Veitch, and John Totleben envisioned John Constantine in his first appearance in *Swamp Thing* as a street-wise blue-collar warlock, and years later, as Constantine starred in his own comic book series, *Hellblazer*, other writers would add more to the character, his story, and his iconic image, which soon influenced other Vertigo characters and other similar investigator-style characters outside of Vertigo.

If there's a short, easy-to-understand description I can use for John Constantine and his history, which would probably be being the "Batman of Vertigo Comics". Like Batman, Constantine has a lot of skills and roles. If Batman is a detective, ninja, and scientist all rolled into one, Constantine is a magician, detective, and con artist all rolled into one. They may be considered opposites in the whole moral alignment-subject, but both fight for the side of good, both would do everything – even sacrifice people – to win, and both use their brains more than their brawn, especially against godlike opponents. These multiple roles of Constantine are courtesy of the various talented writers, many of whom are British, who want to tackle telling the story of one of a few iconic British characters in mainstream comics.

As mentioned before, Alan Moore and his team set the blueprint for John Constantine. To make Constantine more interesting than just an occult expert and assistant to the main character, the creative team (especially Moore and Veitch, who both have an interest in mysticism) gave Constantine a working-class background, an anti-hero personality, and an image that has a striking

resemblance to Sting (a British icon in his own right and one whom the team are big fans of). Many of Constantine's trademark elements also came from Moore's team, including his signature trench coat and cigarettes, his habit of getting people killed, and being surrounded by the people he did get killed.

When Jamie Delano began writing the character as the first *Hellblazer* writer, he established the magus as an occult detective who deals with both supernatural and natural cases, from demons to serial killers. However, Delano was also the first to portray Constantine as a family man by introducing supporting characters like his older sister, Cheryl, his estranged father, Thomas, and his curious niece, Gemma. Delano also placed another important milestone in Constantine's mythos by adding his political beliefs and turning Constantine into an anti-authoritarian liberal who deals with human and monstrous enemies that has resemblance or ties to right-wing conservatives like the Thatcher regime and the Freemasons.

The next writer to write Constantine, Garth Ennis and Paul Jenkins (both of whom wrote stories independently) are of equal importance. While their depiction of the character seems no different from Moore and Delano, with Constantine still being a leftist magician and detective, they are special for building Constantine's image as a trickster and conman, expanding his characteristic of a street-wise hustler by having him outsmart Satan and God. Ennis is probably the most famous Constantine writer with his "Dangerous Habits" arc that has Constantine tricking the Devil to cure his lung cancer. Jenkins himself wrote a story where Constantine literally hustles the "creator", the Judeo-Christian God, to save his soul. Although probably the least famous and certainly most underrated, Jenkins in my opinion is the most balanced writer, being able to integrate Constantine's different roles as magician, detective, and fraudster without focusing only on one. Jenkins is also the most British of them all by writing stories about Arthurian legend and the Hellfire Club.

Another important character, Neil Gaiman, may have only written a few Constantine stories, but he is still important for being the first to add the element of Constantine being a part of a long lineage of sorcerers throughout British history. As the 21st century arrived and the genre of modern horror and occult detective fiction began taking root, writers like Brian Azarello, Warren Ellis, and Mike Carrey further evolved Constantine's story to be scarier and darker, with the character being more cynical, asocial, and powerful in terms of magic than before. The multiple roles and writers have admittedly caused some confusion and criticism, and I sometimes feel I'm reading a different character in every change of writer. There are plot holes too, like for example, in Delano's run, the character

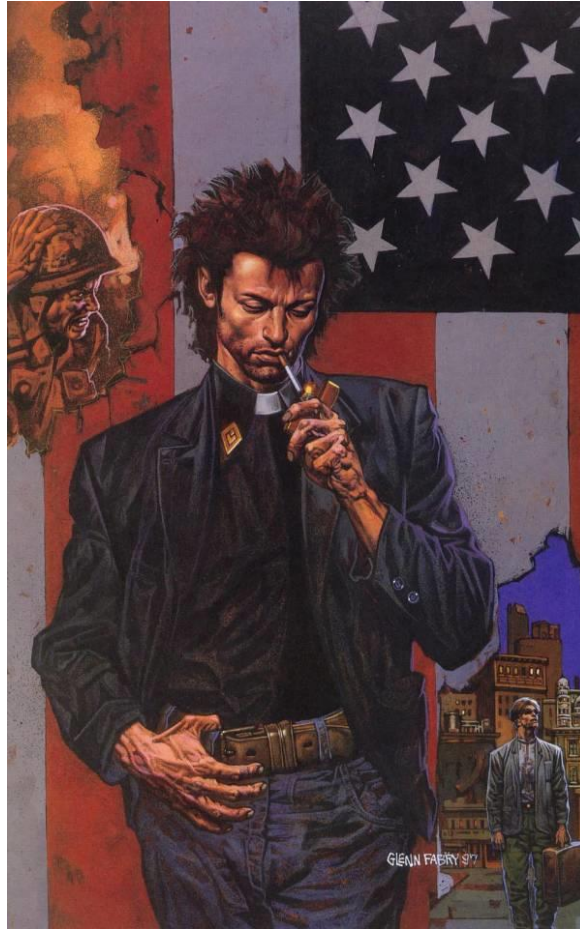
Chas Chandler doesn't know who Gary Lester is, but in Azarello's run, it is shown that they both knew each other as part of Constantine's punk rock band when they were young.

Empire Magazine once published a list of the greatest comic book characters of all time and they placed John Constantine at #3 which caused a lot of eyebrows being raised. Some shouted "Why?", some screamed bias (*Empire* is a British magazine), and some questioned what Constantine had that included him in the list in the first place. I also questioned *Empire's* decision, but still, I can see why Constantine does deserve to be praised as one of the best. He is the most famous and authentic British comic book character in an industry dominated by American and Japanese characters and is certainly the only one I believe the Americans know who is gritty, grungy, and different from all the other posh and upper lip stereotype caricatures. Even our competitor, Marvel Comics, referenced Constantine in their *Hellstrom* comics.

John Constantine is a very special character, one whom transcended the pages of comics and influenced real life as well.

JESSE CUSTER

From: *Preacher* by Garth Ennis



One of the things that I am glad about these days, just the tiny small little things that I appreciate in this busy and stressful adventure we call the adult life, is my child's love of books. Even as videogames and cellphones have taken over kids' lives nowadays, seeing my own flip over page after page of thick novels puts a smile on my face. Rick Riordan's young adult series is the one that he loves to read, and he is always eager to share new stuff he had learned about Greek Mythology from these books. Indeed, I always found these old pagan myths to be somewhat of a favorite in pop culture. From animated Disney films to CGI blockbusters, everyone loves to be entertained by gods and heroes in linethorax battling against hydras and gorgons.

And once again, here in Vertigo, we all like to be different. While the world revels in Greek Mythology, we on the other hand, like to touch a more sensitive kind of

mythology — Judeo-Christian/Abrahamic Mythology. And just by writing that, I know some religious nut out there is already bursting an artery for calling the stories from the bible as myths. While *Hellblazer* also tackles this mythology, the series that truly utilizes this, while also adding and expanding more of it with a bit of artistic grease, is Garth Ennis's neo-western fantasy epic *Preacher*.

Preacher tells the story of Jesse Custer, a former preacher who gets possessed by a powerful mysterious being called Genesis — a being that is said to be powerful enough to rival God. Jesse then sets out on a journey to find and confront God for all the bad things that have happened to him and the world around him, all the while being hunted by those who want to seek Genesis, both natural and supernatural forces. He is assisted in his journey by a female assassin named Tulip, and an Irish vampire named Cassidy. Of all the titles in Vertigo, *Preacher* is the one closest to being considered by myself as a genre buster. While it's a neo-western (aka contemporary western), it can also be considered horror, low fantasy, war, drama, and comedy.

It's the series where Ennis is really able to tackle different themes and genres, except superhero, which he always found to be silly and stupid, especially when it comes to superhero stories that depict soldiers and policemen as weak, pathetic, and beatable by these capes and tights (Ennis has always been a military fanboy). Of all the titles as well, I also consider *Preacher* to be Vertigo's first successful solo epic, unlike Sandman and Hellblazer which, while epics of their own, are both still originally from the DC Universe.

Jesse Custer is a very special character from all the other Vertigo characters. While John Constantine and many others are mostly anti-heroes who only help out if needed, with some others being so antisocial that it's not wrong to call the plain straight-up villains, Jesse is your traditional American hero. He's no American boy scout, but he is a Western cowboy and lonesome gunslinger who travels around, being stoic and cool, and assisting those he meets along in his quest. He's different since he's polite rather than obnoxious, consistent rather than seldom, and lives with moral principles compared to other Vertigo characters who live through pragmatism, selfishness, and survivalism. All of this stems from what his father once told him: "An' you do the right thing. You gotta be one of the good guys, son: 'cause there's way too many of the bad".

Yet, at the same time, he also carries the trademark cynicism of a Vertigo character. While he can be a humanitarian who sees the goodness in people, he's not stupid enough to just believe someone is good just because the majority says so. This is

the reason why his enemies are mostly rich government thugs and even God himself while his allies are assassins and vampires. For Jesse, friendship must be treasured and earned. For him, the bad can be good and the good can be bad.

The subject of good and bad can also be seen in Jesse's other half; the being that entered him in the first place — Genesis. This being was born from the love between an angel and a demon, and was a baby when it first attached itself to Jesse. But even so, it is a very powerful being, capable of taking control or taking over God's creation, mostly humans. With Genesis, Jesse can perform what he calls the "Word of God" which allows him to command and mind control people and other living things to his will (as long as they understand him). Everything he says, people will absolutely follow, sometimes even beyond logical ability and physics (he can command someone to fornicate with oneself or spontaneously combust).

A lot of our fans asked Ennis why such a powerful being was born from something like the consummation between an angel and a demon. And my answer to this comes from the primary characteristic of Vertigo characters I mentioned in the intro. Genesis, as a Vertigo character, is a rebel. Its origin as non-originating from God, therefore becoming an affront to him, is rebellious in itself. Hence why Genesis has that power: as a glitch who doesn't belong, he can overwrite and affect the program that is God's creation. In some ways, Genesis represents what society considers "accidents" or "unplanned blessings" in this sometimes uncaring world. They may be born unwanted, but they also have the opportunity to shake the world and make a name for themselves in history.

That being said, *Preacher* is not a perfect book. There are plot holes in the story, courtesy of Ennis's habit of writing on the fly rather than plotting everything first in a draft. Questions like how did Cassidy survive being shot by the Saints of Killers (whose guns can kill Satan and God), or what is the Throne of God, why it makes him invincible when he sits on it, and why it appear only in the last pages of the last arc. Ennis did gave some answers to these questions but these were not enough to the point where fans had to make their theories.

Preacher has some problems but these don't affect how much of a masterpiece it is. It garnered awards, was the first independent Vertigo story that gained popularity, and was one of the first comics that made the internet forums mad with how "overpowered" its characters are. It remains one of our best and helped inspire new original Vertigo stories to be published.

JACK HORNER

From: *Fables* by Bill Willingham



The third and final character in our list is a very special and different one. He's also a personal favorite of mine. Bill Willingham's *Fables* is the second-longest series in Vertigo history, right after *Hellblazer*. It is a mythopoeic story similar to Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, and tells the story of the fairy tale and folklore characters we grew up reading as children, being transported into our world, and living among us in a place called Fabletown. It is a unique story that uses amalgamations in its storytelling, like the Big Bad Wolf of Red Riding Hood and Three Little Pigs fame, being turned into a human and becoming the protector of Fabletown, and the Prince Charming from the stories Snow White, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella, becoming a drifter who survives by seducing women he comes across.

Of all the titles so far, *Fables* is the least best in my opinion. Although the premise is interesting and the main characters are entertaining, I've always preferred original stories with their own creative universes to those that rely on, were built upon, or are already using pre-existing stories and characters. While it's fun to recognize these references, such elements are disadvantageous to those who don't know these essential story elements. However, one character did catch my eye.

One I believe to be the funniest character, not just in *Fables*, but in *Vertigo* as a whole: Jack Horner or Jack of the Tales.

Jack is Fabletown's resident trickster, con man, and swindler, and is also the character from stories such as *Jack Horner*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Jack the Giant Slayer*, *Jack Frost*, *Jack O'Lantern*, and the *American Jack Tales* (basically an amalgamation of every nursery rhyme, fairy tale, and folklore story whose main character is named Jack). He has a lot of similarities with John Constantine since both are blonde con artists, selfish a-holes who're ready to sacrifice anyone to win, and both are fourth wall breakers. But unlike the *Hellblazer*, Jack's story is far more comedic, surrealistic, and insane.

Jack Horner's story concerns a cunning rogue who manages to defeat foes that are way more powerful than him through guile and deceit. Jack's enemies typically range from other fairy tale and folklore characters to godlike embodiments and personifications. In the original *Fables* series, Jack's most triumphant feats include defeating the Devil in a game of poker and trapping the Grim Reaper inside a magical bag. And he did it all in just one issue (said magical bag is also probably Jack's strongest weapon, which is said to have been lost but can probably be resummoned by Jack using his reality-warping powers). In Fabletown, while the other fables aren't fond of Jack Horner, he does help out if needed, especially when it comes to keeping Fabletown hidden from mundane humans, and warning Fabletown of incoming threats from the Adversary, the villain who drove the *Fables* away in the first place. The moment he got kicked out from Fabletown and starred in his own spin-off series called *Jack of Fables*, he traveled around America, defeating even more powerful enemies like the Literals, who are the godlike embodiments of writing.

Although more of a thinker than a bruiser, Jack can still handle himself well in a fight. He defeated the mad rebel Goldilocks, can hold his own against Bigby Wolf (though he gets his butt kicked), and defeated numerous gangsters, zombies, knights and the Adversary's wooden soldiers. And he can do it all since, as one of the most popular fairy tale characters, he is stronger, faster, and most importantly, more durable than humans or even average fable. Durability is Jack's strongest weapon besides his cunning, which he got by making deals with various versions of the Devil like Old Scratch, Pan, Lucifer, Chernabog, and Nick Slick to extend his lifespan, making him unkillable. He can still be hurt, wounded, or knocked out, but he cannot die unless his time runs out and his soul is finally collected by Hell. He did almost die during his escape from Mr. Revise's prison, but he still ended up living because it was not his time yet.

That being said, he's also probably the most difficult character to like in this list, since Jack is a borderline psychopath who cares for no one but himself. Although he does show care for his fellow fables and his best friend, the Literal, Gary the Pathetic Fallacy, he is a horrible person who is an annoying braggart at least and an unemotional psycho who doesn't care if he hurts or kills those he meets. There's also criticism surrounding the character's apparent misogyny, which is probably true, since almost every woman he meets, he either has sex with or has been coerced to have sex with him. During *The Great Fables Crossover*, Jack takes advantage of his ex-girlfriend's, Rose Red's, depression to casually and uncaringly have sex with her. I don't really think Willingham wanted to intentionally add such a rape-ish scene in the series. He probably wanted it to be funny. But I agree that he went too far.

Bill Willingham also has lackluster character development. There was a chance that he and his co-writer, Matthew Sturges, could have mellowed Jack and made him more caring and supportive. There is evidence of this seeing how Jack lovingly interacts with Gary from time to time. But they ditched all of that to focus solely on slapstick. While it's always funny to see a jerk gets his due, it's better to transcend him instead towards redemption.

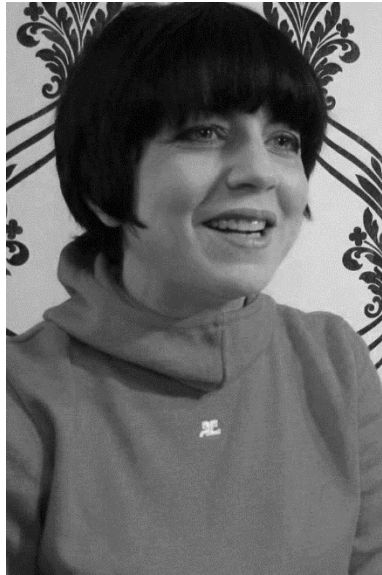
Still, these don't affect what made Jack Horner so special. Like John Constantine, there's always something awe-inspiring about someone triumphing against all odds, against enemies and situations he should have no chance of winning, even if said someone is a douchebag. There's a reason why I suggested to Willingham to put Jack in a separate spin-off series rather than writing him off the series. Whatever achievements Jack earns in the real world, from being a character in an Eisner-award-winning comic to being probably the most hated character in comic book history, is still a win for me.

CLOSING

Vertigo characters can come from any setting, any origin; from any gender or age, class, or upbringing. I'm sure some of you wanted me to add more characters to this analysis, and maybe I can do that when the next encyclopedia comes. But for now, I hope with this booklet, we can celebrate what made Vertigo Comics so unique — the cynicism and the rebellion, the magnificence and the stoics. And in some ways, strengthen our love for these titles and characters even more.

There will be more stories to enjoy in the future. And I'll always make sure to only bring the best for our fans.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Shelly Bond is an American comic book editor, known for her two decades at DC Comics' Vertigo (DC Comics) imprint, for which she was executive editor from 2013 to 2016.

In the winter of 1992, Bond landed a job as an assistant editor for Karen Berger at Vertigo Comics. She worked together with many top talents in the comic book industry, such as Neil Gaiman, Bill Willingham, Ed Brubaker, and Mike Carey, churning out commercial and critically-acclaimed titles like *The Sandman*, *Sandman Mystery Theatre*, *iZombie*, *Terminal City*, *Heavy Liquid*, *Fables*, *Deadenders*, *Young Liars*, and *The Invisibles*. Her supervision in books like *Lucifer*, *Shade the Changing Man*, and many others, helped in shaping the Vertigo Universe as it is known today.